

# CULTURAL STUDIES

theory and practice

5th edition

FILM- OG MEDIEVIDENSKAB  
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# AN INTRODUCTION TO CULTURAL STUDIES

Given the title of this book – *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice* – it would be reasonable to expect a comprehensive account of cultural studies, including summaries and discussions of its main arguments and substantive sites of intellectual enquiry. Indeed, this is what has been attempted. However, we want to open this account of cultural studies with a kind of 'health warning' regarding the scope of the book.

## CONCERNING THIS BOOK

### Selectivity

Any book about cultural studies is necessarily selective and likely to engender debate, argument and even conflict. To offer a truly comprehensive account of cultural studies would be to reproduce, or at least to summarize, every single text ever written within the parameters of cultural studies. Not only would this be too mammoth a task for any writer, but also the problem would remain of deciding which texts warranted the nomination. Consequently, this book, like all others, is implicated in constructing a *particular version* of cultural studies.

We do offer, under the rubric of 'culture and cultural studies', some (selective) history of the field. However, most of the later chapters, the *sites* of cultural studies, draw on more contemporary theory. Indeed, in order to make the book as useful as possible in as many different geographical places as possible, there is a stress on theory over context-specific empirical work (though theory is also context-specific and the text does try to link theory with empirical work). In doing so, we deploy a good number of theorists who would not describe themselves as working within cultural studies but who have something to say which has informed the field. Thus, writers like Tony Bennett, Paul Gilroy, Lawrence

Grossberg, Stuart Hall, Meaghan Morris and Paul Willis would probably accept a description of their work as 'cultural studies'. However, though extremely influential, neither Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida nor Roland Barthes would have described themselves in this way, just as Anthony Giddens would not adopt this self-nomination today.

This book is a selective account because it stresses a certain type of cultural studies. In particular, we explore that version of cultural studies which places language at its heart. The kind of cultural studies influenced by poststructuralist theories of language, representation and subjectivity is given greater attention than a cultural studies more concerned with the ethnography of lived experience or with cultural policy. Nevertheless, both do receive attention and we are personally supportive of both.

**# Cultural studies does not speak with one voice, it cannot be spoken with one voice, and we do not have one voice with which to represent it.**

The title of this book is somewhat over-ambitious in its claims. Not only is this a selective account of cultural studies, it is also one that draws very largely from work developed in Britain, the United States, Continental Europe (most notably France) and Australia. We draw very little from the growing body of work in Africa, Asia and Latin America. As such, it would be more accurate to call this text 'western cultural studies'. We simply do not feel qualified to say how much cultural studies, as we understand it, is pertinent to the social and cultural conditions of Africa (though we do acknowledge that the rapid growth of the cybersphere is producing a multitude of digital cultures which have transnational qualities).

### The language-game of cultural studies

Further, this book tends to gloss over differences within western cultural studies, despite doubts about whether theory developed in one context (e.g. Britain) can be workable in another (e.g. Australia) (Ang and Stratton, 1996; Turner, 1992). Nevertheless, we want to justify this degree of generalization about cultural studies. We maintain that the term 'cultural studies' has no referent to which we can point. Rather, cultural studies is constituted by the language-game of cultural studies. The theoretical terms developed and deployed by persons calling their work cultural studies are what cultural studies 'is'. We stress the language of cultural studies as constitutive of cultural studies and draw attention at the start of each chapter to what we take to be important terms. Subsequently, each of these concepts, and others, can be referred to in the Glossary at the end of the book.

These are concepts that have been deployed in the various geographical sites of cultural studies. For, as Grossberg et al. have argued, though cultural studies has stressed conjunctural analysis, 'which is embedded, descriptive, and historically and contextually specific, there are some concepts in cultural studies across the globe which form 'a history of real achievements that is now part of the cultural studies tradition', and to do without which

would be 'to willingly accept real incapacitation' (1992: 8). Concepts are tools for thinking and acting in the world.

### Cultural studies as politics

It remains difficult to pin down the boundaries of cultural studies as a coherent, unified, academic discipline with clear-cut substantive topics, concepts and methods that differentiate it from other disciplines. Cultural studies has always been a multi- or post-disciplinary field of enquiry which blurs the boundaries between itself and other 'subjects'. It is not physics, it is not sociology and it is not linguistics, though it draws upon these subject areas. Indeed, there must be, as Hall (1992a) argues, something at stake in cultural studies that differentiates it from other subject areas.

For Hall, what is at stake is the connection that cultural studies seeks to make to matters of power and cultural politics. That is, to an exploration of representations of and 'for' marginalized social groups and the need for cultural change. Hence, cultural studies is a body of theory generated by thinkers who regard the production of theoretical knowledge as a political practice. Here, knowledge is never a neutral or objective phenomenon but a matter of positionality, that is, of the place from which one speaks, to whom, and for what purposes.

At the start of the evolution of British cultural studies the idea that the field was politically engaged was taken as a defining characteristic. Today, cultural studies' alignment with political activism is more controversial – both inside and outside of the field. Grossberg questions such approaches in *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*, where he argues that it should not be the job of critical scholars and analysts of the contemporary 'to offer a normative politics or even morally based political judgments' or 'to tell people what they should be or should desire' (2010: 97). In this book, we support the idea that cultural studies provides a useful way to think about and engage in cultural politics, but we do not wish to be prescriptive about the form these politics might take. We accept that the notion of 'progressive' social change is not commonsensical or self-evident, but varies from person to person. Our aim, therefore, is to offer various conceptual and theoretical architectures that might be useful for thinking about and attempting to effect cultural change, but to leave open the question about what these changes ought to be.

### The Tea Party

The Tea Party movement in the US advocates for conservative political policies such as reducing the size of government, lowering taxes and promoting free market economics. Supporters make up about 10 per cent of the American population. They feel aggrieved by existing policies and utilize protest methods – such as large, public rallies involving vocal protestors holding placards – that some might associate more with left-wing movements.

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- In your view, is the Tea Party a marginalized social group?
- How do its calls for social change compare with those made by, for example, the Occupy movement and its international protests against social and economic inequality?
- How might cultural studies approaches be used to understand the ideals and dynamics of conservative political movements?

## THE PARAMETERS OF CULTURAL STUDIES

There is a difference between the study of culture and institutionally located cultural studies. The study of culture has taken place in a variety of academic disciplines (sociology, anthropology, English literature, etc.) and in a range of geographical and institutional spaces. However, this is not to be understood as cultural studies. The study of culture has no origins, and to locate one is to exclude other possible starting points. Nevertheless this does not mean that cultural studies cannot be named and its key concepts identified.

Cultural studies is a discursive formation, that is, 'a cluster (or *formation*) of ideas, images and practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society' (Hall, 1997a: 6). Cultural studies is constituted by a *regulated* way of speaking about objects (which it brings into view) and coheres around key concepts, ideas and concerns. Further, cultural studies had a moment at which it named itself, even though that naming marks only a cut or snapshot of an ever-evolving intellectual project.

## KEY THINKERS

### Stuart Hall (1932–2014)

A West Indian-born British thinker initially associated with the 'New Left' of the late-1960s, Hall was the Director of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies from 1968 to 1979. It was during this time that an identifiable and particular field called cultural studies began to emerge. Hall is perhaps the most significant figure in the development of British cultural studies. His work makes considerable use of Antonio Gramsci and the concepts of ideology and hegemony, though he also played a significant part in deploying poststructuralism in cultural studies.

Reading: Morley, D. and Chen, D. K.-H. (eds.) (1996) *Stuart Hall*. London: Routledge.

## The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies

Cultural studies has been reluctant to accept institutional legitimization. Nevertheless, the formation of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham University in the UK in the 1960s was a decisive organizational instance. Since that time, cultural studies has extended its intellectual base and geographic scope. There are self-defined cultural studies practitioners in the USA, Australia, Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe, with each 'formation' of cultural studies working in different ways. While we are not privileging British cultural studies *per se*, we are pointing to the formation of cultural studies at Birmingham as an institutionally significant moment. By the same token, we note that the controversial *closing* of the CCCS in 2002 also marked a significant moment in the field's attempt to respond to critique and keep pace with the rapidly changing nature of its objects and subjects of analyses (see the 'Critiquing cultural studies' section below).

Since its emergence, cultural studies has acquired a multitude of institutional bases, courses, textbooks and students as it has become something to be taught. As Jim McGuigan (1997a) comments, it is difficult to see how it could be otherwise, despite the concern that professionalized and institutionalized cultural studies may 'formalize out of existence the critical questions of power, history and politics' (Hall, 1992a: 286). Cultural studies' main location has always been institutions of higher education and the bookshop. Consequently, one way of 'defining' cultural studies is to look at what university courses offer to students. This necessarily involves 'disciplining' cultural studies.

## Disciplining cultural studies

Many cultural studies practitioners oppose forging disciplinary boundaries for the field. However, it is hard to see how this can be resisted if cultural studies wants to survive by attracting degree students and funding (as opposed to being only a postgraduate research activity). In that context, Bennett (1998) offers his 'element of a definition' of cultural studies:

- Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary field in which perspectives from different disciplines can be selectively drawn on to examine the relations of culture and power.
- 'Cultural studies is concerned with all those practices, institutions and systems of classification through which there are inculcated in a population particular values, beliefs, competencies, routines of life and habitual forms of conduct' (Bennett, 1998: 28).
- The forms of power that cultural studies explores are diverse and include gender, race, class, colonialism, etc. Cultural studies seeks to explore the connections between these forms of power and to develop ways of thinking about culture and power that can be utilized by agents in the pursuit of change.
- The prime institutional sites for cultural studies are those of higher education, and as such, cultural studies is like other academic disciplines. Nevertheless, it tries to forge

connections outside of the academy with social and political movements, workers in cultural institutions, and cultural management.

With this in mind, we may consider the kinds of concepts and concerns that regulate cultural studies as a discursive formation or language-game.

### Criticizing cultural studies

Cultural studies has been criticized for, among other alleged problems, theoretical dilettante-ism, a lack of rigorous scientific method, an ahistorical focus on only contemporary readings of popular mass media texts, and being little more than a fad. Of particular provocation is cultural studies' challenge to the idea that there exists a single objective reality or truth (see Chapters 2, 3, 6 and 7). The philosopher Roger Scruton uses this as the basis for his claim that, 'Reason is now on the retreat, both as an ideal and as a reality' (1999), while Harry G. Frankfurt, another contemporary philosopher, dismisses this approach to thinking as nothing less than 'bullshit' (2005).

In some cases, criticisms of cultural studies seem to have a degree of legitimacy – not least because some critiques come from scholars within the field itself. Graeme Turner, for instance, argues that contemporary cultural studies has lost track of its central goal of operating with political and moral purpose for the public good (2012: 12). Even Hall – one of the founding figures in the field – speaks of cultural studies as containing 'a lot of rubbish' (cited in Taylor, 2007). In other cases, however, attacks can be read as supporting the central cultural studies claim that there exists strong resistance to the notion that 'low' or mass popular culture be considered as seriously as those 'high' cultural forms that have traditionally been appreciated only by the elite. Consider, for example, the American literary critic Harold Bloom who views cultural studies as an 'incredible absurdity' and as yet another example of the 'arrogance... of the semi-learned' (cited in Gritz, 2003). For more discussion of debates within and criticisms of cultural studies, see Chapter 14.

### The Sokal Affair

In 1996, the physics professor Alan D. Sokal submitted a parody essay to *Social Text* – an academic journal specializing in postmodern cultural studies. Sokal later said he'd submitted the article because he'd been wondering whether his failure to make sense of terms such as *jouissance* and *différance* reflected his own inadequacies or a decline in the standards of intellectual rigor in certain precincts of the American academic humanities. So, to test the prevailing intellectual standards, I decided to try a modest (though admittedly uncontrollable) experiment. Would a leading North American journal of cultural studies ... publish an article liberally salted with nonsense if (a) it sounded good and (b) it flattered the editors'.

ideological preconceptions?' (Sokal, 1996b). The answer, embarrassingly enough for *Social Text*, turned out to be 'yes', and *Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity* was published in a special 'Science Wars' edition of the journal. In it, Sokal suggests that physical reality (including quantum gravity) is a social and linguistic construct, and accuses natural scientists of clinging to the dogma that there exists an external world, knowledge about which can be unearthed through 'objective' procedures prescribed by 'the (so-called) scientific method' (1996a). Sokal's revelation that the article was a hoax prompted heated debate about issues such as standards in academic publishing, the influence of postmodern philosophy on cultural studies, the evacuation of meaning which can result from the mis-use and over-use of jargon and the ethics of using deception to make a point. Sokal, meanwhile, defended his actions by saying that anyone who really believed the laws of physics were mere social conventions might like to try transgressing them from the windows of his 21st floor apartment (Sokal, 1996b).

- What are your views on this hoax? Was Sokal's point legitimate, or was he simply being unfair to a discipline that approaches sense-making in a manner different from his own?
- Do you think it was OK for him to use his academic credentials to trick the editors of *Social Text* into thinking his essay was submitted in good faith – or should they have taken greater care to check his work?
- Do the complex and specialized vocabularies associated with academic fields such as cultural studies *add to* or *detract from* meaning?
- Are there any similarities between the Sokal affair and television programmes such as *Candid Camera* or *Punk'd*?
- What are your views, more generally, about the ethics of hoaxing?

## KEY CONCEPTS IN CULTURAL STUDIES

### Culture and signifying practices

Cultural studies would not warrant its name without a focus on culture (Chapter 2). As Hall puts it, 'By culture, here we mean the actual grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages and customs of any specific society. We also mean the contradictory forms of common sense which have taken root in and helped to shape popular life' (1996c: 439). Culture is concerned with questions of shared social meanings, that is, the various ways we make sense of the world. However, meanings are not simply floating 'out there'; rather, they are generated through signs, most notably those of language.

Cultural studies has argued that language is not a neutral medium for the formation of meanings and understanding about an independent object world whose meanings exist outside of language. Rather, it is constitutive of those very meanings and knowledge. That is,

language gives meaning to material objects and social practices that are brought into view by language and made intelligible to us in terms that language delimits. These processes of meaning production are *signifying practices*. In order to understand culture, we need to explore how meaning is produced symbolically in language as a 'signifying system' (Chapter 3).

### Representation

A good deal of cultural studies is centred on questions of representation; that is, on how the world is socially constructed and represented to and by us in meaningful ways. Indeed, the central strand of cultural studies can be understood as the study of culture as the signifying practices of representation. This requires us to explore the textual generation of meaning. It also demands investigation of the modes by which meaning is produced in a variety of contexts. Further, cultural representations and meanings have a certain materiality. That is, they are embedded in sounds, inscriptions, objects, images, books, magazines and television programmes. They are produced, enacted, used and understood in specific social contexts.

## THE PLANET



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- Is this image a reflection of the natural world or a cultural representation?
- This picture was only possible with the advent of space travel. How might its appearance in our culture have changed the way we think about ourselves?
- Can you imagine cultural life without this picture in our minds?

### Materialism and non-reductionism

Cultural studies has, for the most part, been concerned with modern industrialized economies and media cultures organized along capitalist lines. Here representations are produced by corporations that are driven by the profit motive. In this context, cultural studies has developed a form of cultural materialism that is concerned with exploring how and why meanings are inscribed at the moment of production. That is, as well as being centred on signifying practices, cultural studies tries to connect them with political economy. This is a discipline concerned with power and the distribution of economic and social resources. Consequently, cultural studies has been concerned with:

- who owns and controls cultural production;
- the distribution mechanisms for cultural products;
- the consequences of patterns of ownership and control for contours of the cultural landscape.

Having said that, one of the central tenets of cultural studies is its non-reductionism. Culture is seen as having its own specific meanings, rules and practices which are not reducible to, or explainable solely in terms of, another category or level of a social formation. To put it in lay terms: a cultural text, artifact or phenomenon cannot be explained by one single causal factor such as 'the economy'. In particular, cultural studies has waged a battle against economic reductionism; that is, the attempt to explain what a cultural text means by reference to its place in the production process. For cultural studies, the processes of political economy do not determine the meanings of texts or their appropriation by audiences. Rather, political economy, social relationships and culture must be understood in terms of their own specific logics and modes of development. Each of these domains is 'articulated' or related together in context-specific ways. The non-reductionism of cultural studies insists that questions of class, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nation and age have their own particularities which cannot be reduced either to political economy or to each other.

### Articulation

Cultural studies has deployed the concept of articulation in order to theorize the relationships between components of a social formation. This idea refers to the formation of a



temporary unity between elements that do not have to go together. Articulation suggests both expressing/representing and a 'putting-together'. Thus, representations of gender may be 'put-together' with representations of race or nation so that, for example, nations are spoken of as female. This occurs in context-specific and contingent ways that cannot be predicted before the fact. The concept of articulation is also used to discuss the relationship between culture and political economy. Thus culture is said to be 'articulated' with moments of production but not determined in any 'necessary' way by that moment, and vice versa. Consequently, we might explore not only how the moment of production is inscribed in texts but also how the 'economic' is cultural; that is, a meaningful set of practices.

### Power

Cultural studies writers generally agree on the centrality of the concept of power to the discipline. For most cultural studies writers, power is regarded as pervading every level of social relationships. Power is not simply the glue that holds the social together, or the coercive force which subordinates one set of people to another, though it certainly may involve these things. It is also understood in terms of the processes that generate and enable any form of social action, relationship or order. In this sense, power, while certainly constraining, is also enabling. Having said that, cultural studies has shown a specific concern with subordinated groups, at first with class, and later with races, genders, nations, age groups, etc.

### Ideology and popular culture

Subordination is a matter not just of coercion but also of consent. Cultural studies has commonly understood popular culture to be the ground on which this consent is won or lost. As a way of grasping the interplay of power and consent, two related concepts were repeatedly deployed in cultural studies' earlier texts, though they are less prevalent these days – namely, ideology and hegemony.

The term 'ideology' is commonly used to refer to maps of meaning that, while purporting to be universal truths, are actually historically specific understandings that obscure and maintain power. For example, television news produces understandings of the world that continually explain it in terms of nations, perceived as 'naturally' occurring objects. This may have the consequence of obscuring both the class divisions of social formations and the constructed character of nationality.

Representations of gender in advertising, which depict women as housewives or sexy bodies alone, are seen to be reducing women to those categories. As such, they may deny women their place as full human beings and citizens. The process of making, maintaining and reproducing ascendant meanings and practices has been called hegemony. Hegemony implies a situation where a 'historical bloc' of powerful groups exercises social authority and leadership over subordinate groups through the winning of consent.

### Texts and readers

The production of consent implies popular identification with the cultural meanings generated by the signifying practices of hegemonic texts. The concept of text suggests not simply the written word, though this is one of its senses, but also all practices that signify. This includes the generation of meaning through images, sounds, objects (such as clothes) and activities (like dance and sport). Since images, sounds, objects and practices are sign systems, which signify with the same mechanism as a language, we may refer to them as cultural texts.

However, the meanings that critics read into cultural texts are not necessarily the same as those produced by active audiences or readers. Indeed, readers will not necessarily share all the same meanings with each other. Critics, in other words, are simply a particular breed of reader. Further, texts, as forms of representation, are polysemic. That is, they contain the possibility of a number of different meanings that have to be realized by actual readers who give life to words and images. We can examine the ways in which texts work, but we cannot simply 'read-off' audiences' meaning production from textual analysis. At the very least, meaning is produced in the interplay between text and reader. Consequently, the moment of consumption is seen by many as a moment of meaningful production.

### Subjectivity and identity

The moment of consumption marks one of the processes by which we are formed and we form ourselves as persons. What it is to be a person, viz. subjectivity, and how we describe ourselves to each other, viz. identity, became central areas of concern in cultural studies during the 1990s. In other words, cultural studies explores:

- how we come to be the kinds of people we are;
- how we are produced as subjects;
- how we identify with (or emotionally invest in) descriptions of ourselves as male or female, black or white, young or old.

The argument, known as *anti-essentialism*, is that identities are not things that exist; they have no essential or universal qualities. Rather, they are discursive constructions, the product of discourses or regulated ways of speaking about the world. In other words, identities are constituted (made rather than found) by representations such as language. A particularly cogent example involves gender identity and the idea that gender is not something we 'are' but something we 'perform' or 'do' – as explored by the feminist philosopher Judith Butler (1990) (see also Chapters 7 and 9).

Overall, some of the key concepts that constitute the discursive formation of cultural studies are:

## KEY CONCEPTS

Active audiences	Politics
Anti-essentialism	Polysemy
Articulation	Popular culture
Cultural materialism	Positionality
Culture	Power
Discourse	Representation
Discursive formation	Signifying practices
Hegemony	(the) Social
Identity	Social formation
Ideology	Subjectivity
Language-game	Texts
Political economy	

# Cultural studies writers differ about how to deploy these concepts and about which are the most significant.

## THE INTELLECTUAL STRANDS OF CULTURAL STUDIES

The concepts we have explored are drawn from a range of theoretical and methodological paradigms. The most influential theories within cultural studies have been: Marxism, culturalism, structuralism, poststructuralism, psychoanalysis and the politics of difference (under which heading, for the sake of convenience, we include feminism, theories of race, ethnicity and postcolonialism). The purpose of sketching the basic tenets of these theoretical domains is to provide a signpost to thinking in the field. However, each is developed in more detail throughout the text and there is no one place in the book to look for theory. Theory permeates all levels of cultural studies and needs to be connected to specific issues and debates rather than explored solely in the abstract.

### Marxism and the centrality of class

Marxism is, above all, a form of historical materialism. It stresses the historical specificity of human affairs and the changeable character of social formations whose core features

are located in the material conditions of existence. Karl Marx (1961) argued that the first priority of human beings is the production of their means of subsistence through labour. As humans produce food, clothes and all manner of tools with which to shape their environment, so they also create themselves. Thus labour, and the forms of social organization that material production takes, called 'modes of production', are central categories of Marxism.

The organization of a mode of production is not simply a matter of co-ordinating objects, rather, it is inherently tied up with relations between people. These relationships, while social, that is, co-operative and co-ordinated, are also matters of power and conflict. Indeed, Marxists regard social antagonisms as being the motor of historical change. Further, given the priority accorded to production, other aspects of human relations – consciousness, culture and politics – are said to be structured by economic relations (see Chapter 2).

For Marxism, history is not a smooth evolutionary process. Rather, it is marked by significant breaks and discontinuities of modes of production. Thus, Marx discusses the transformations from an ancient mode of production to a feudal mode of production and thence to the capitalist mode of production. Different forms of material organization and different social relations characterize each mode of production. Further, each mode of production is superseded by another as internal contradictions, particularly those of class conflict, lead to its transformation and replacement.

### Capitalism

The centre-piece of Marx's work was an analysis of the dynamics of capitalism. This is a mode of production premised on the private ownership of the means of production (in his day, factories, mills, workshops; and in a more contemporary vein, multinational corporations). The fundamental class division of capitalism is between those who own the means of production, the bourgeoisie, and those who, being a property-less proletariat, must sell their labour to survive.

The legal framework and common-sense thinking of capitalist societies declare that the worker is a free agent and the sale of labour a free and fair contract. However, Marx argues that this appearance covers over a fundamental exploitation at work. Capitalism aims to make a profit and does so by extracting surplus value from workers. That is, the value of the labour taken to produce a product, which becomes the property of the bourgeoisie, is less than the worker receives for it.

The realization of surplus value in monetary form is achieved by the selling of goods (which have both 'use value' and 'exchange value') as commodities. A commodity is something available to be sold in the marketplace. Thus, commodification is the process associated with capitalism by which objects, qualities and signs are turned into commodities. The surface appearance of goods sold in the marketplace obscures the origins of those commodities in an exploitative relationship, a process Marx calls commodity fetishism. Further, the fact that workers are faced with the products of their own labour now separated



from them constitutes alienation. Since the proletariat are alienated from the core of human activity, namely the labour process, so they are also alienated from themselves.

Capitalism is a dynamic system whose profit-driven mechanisms lead to the continual revolutionizing of the means of production and the forging of new markets. For Marx, this was its great merit in relation to feudalism. This is because it heralded a massive expansion in the productive capacities of European societies. It dragged them into the modern world of railways, mass production, cities and a formally equitable and free set of human relations in which people were not, in a legal sense, the property of others (as were serfs in feudal societies).

However, the mechanisms of capitalism also give rise to perennial crises and will ultimately lead, or so Marx argued, to its being superseded by socialism. Problems for capitalism include:

- a falling rate of profit;
- cycles of boom and bust;
- an increasing monopoly;
- the creation of a proletariat which is set to become the system's grave-digger.

Marx hoped that capitalism would be rent asunder by class conflict. He envisaged the proletariat's organizations of defence, trade unions and political parties, overthrowing and replacing it with a mode of production based on communal ownership, equitable distribution and ultimately the end of class division.

### *Marxism and cultural studies*

Cultural studies writers have had a long and ambiguous, but ultimately productive relationship with Marxism. Cultural studies is not a Marxist domain, but has drawn succour from it while subjecting it to vigorous critique. There is no doubt that we live in social formations organized along capitalist lines that manifest deep class divisions in work, wages, housing, education and health. Further, cultural practices are commodified by large corporate culture industries. In that context, cultural studies has been partisan in taking up the cause of change in terms of making these links – and the inequities associated with them – more transparent.

However, Marxism has been critiqued for its apparent teleology. That is, the positing of an inevitable point to which history is moving, namely the demise of capitalism and the arrival of a classless society. This is a problem on both theoretical and empirical grounds. Theoretically, a determinist reading of Marxism robs human beings of agency or the capacity to act. This is so because the outcomes of human action appear to be predetermined by metaphysical laws (ironically posing as objective science) that drive history from outside of human action. It is a problem on empirical grounds because of the failure of significant

numbers of proletarian revolutions to materialize, and the oppressive totalitarian outcomes of those that made claims to be such revolutions.

In its engagement with Marxism, cultural studies has been particularly concerned with issues of structure and action. On the one hand, Marxism suggests that there are regularities or structures to human existence that lie outside of any given individual. On the other hand, it has a commitment to change through human agency.

Cultural studies has resisted the economic determinism inherent in some readings of Marxism and has asserted the specificity of culture. Cultural studies has also been concerned with the apparent success of capitalism – that is, not merely its survival but its transformation and expansion. This has been attributed in part to the winning of consent for capitalism on the level of culture. Hence the interest in questions of culture, ideology and hegemony (see Chapters 2 and 14) which were commonly pursued through perspectives dubbed culturalism and structuralism (see Hall, 1992a).

### *Culturalism and structuralism*

In the collective mythology of cultural studies, Richard Hoggart (1957), Raymond Williams (1965, 1979, 1981, 1983) and Edward Palmer Thompson (1963) are held to be early figureheads representing the moment of 'culturalism'. This perspective is later contrasted with 'structuralism'. Indeed, culturalism is a *post hoc* term that owes its sense precisely to a contrast with structuralism.

### *Culture is ordinary*

Culturalism stresses the 'ordinariness' of culture and the active, creative capacity of people to construct shared meaningful practices. Empirical work, which is emphasized within the culturalist tradition, explores the way that active human beings create cultural meanings. There is a focus on lived experience and the adoption of a broadly anthropological definition of culture which describes it as an everyday lived process not confined to 'high' art. (One criticism of contemporary cultural studies is that it has come to focus too much on pastimes – for example, watching cat videos on YouTube – and not enough on the lived realities of life, such as working, studying or socialising with friends in pubs or clubs (Newbold et al., 2002: 252).)

Culturalism, particularly for Williams and Thompson, is a form of historical cultural materialism that traces the unfolding of meaning over time. Here culture is to be explored within the context of its material conditions of production and reception. There is an explicit partisanship in exploring the class basis of culture that aims to give 'voice' to the subordinated and to examine the place of culture in class power. However, this form of 'left culturalism' is also somewhat nationalistic, or at least nation-centred, in its approach. There is little sense of either the globalizing character of contemporary culture or the place of race within national and class cultures. Changes in the political and cultural landscape are also complicating the ability to make neat divisions between the political 'right' and 'left'.

### Structuralism

Culturalism takes meaning to be its central category and casts it as the product of active human agents. By contrast, structuralism speaks of signifying practices that generate meaning as an outcome of structures or predictable regularities that lie outside of any given person. Structuralism searches for the constraining patterns of culture and social life which lie outside of any given person. Individual acts are explained as the product of social structures. As such, structuralism is anti-humanist in its decentering of human agents from the heart of enquiry. Instead it favours a form of analysis in which phenomena have meaning only in relation to other phenomena within a systematic structure of which no particular person is the source. A structuralist understanding of culture is concerned with the 'systems of relations' of an underlying structure (usually language) and the grammar that makes meaning possible.

### Deep structures of language

Structuralism in cultural studies takes signification or meaning production to be the effect of deep structures of language that are manifested in specific cultural phenomena or human speakers. However, meaning is the outcome not of the intentions of actors *per se* but of the language itself. Thus, structuralism is concerned with how cultural meaning is generated, understanding culture to be analogous to (or structured like) a language (Chapter 3).

The work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1960) was critical in the development of structuralism. He argued that meaning is generated through a system of structured differences in language. That is, significance is the outcome of the rules and conventions that organize language (*langue*) rather than the specific uses and utterances which individuals deploy in everyday life (*parole*).

According to Saussure, meaning is produced through a process of selection and combination of signs along two axes, namely:

1. the syntagmatic (linear – e.g. a sentence);
2. the paradigmatic (a field of signs – e.g. synonyms).

The organization of signs along these axes forms a signifying system. Signs, constituted by signifiers (medium) and signifieds (meaning), do not make sense by virtue of reference to entities in an independent object world; rather, they generate meaning by reference to each other. Meaning is a social convention organized through the relations between signs.

In short, Saussure, and structuralism in general, are concerned more with the structures of language which allow linguistic performance to be possible than with actual performance in its infinite variations. Structuralism proceeds through the analysis of binaries: for example the contrast between *langue* and *parole* or between pairs of signs so that 'black' only has meaning in relation to 'white', and vice versa.

### KEY THINKERS

#### Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913)

Saussure was a Swiss linguist whose posthumously published work laid the basis for structural linguistics or semiotics – the 'science' of signs. Saussure's influence on cultural studies comes indirectly through the work of other thinkers, like Roland Barthes, who were influenced by him. The central tenet of Saussure's argument is that language is to be understood as a sign system constituted by interrelated terms without positive values (i.e. meaning is relational). *Langue*, or the formal structure of signs, is said to be the proper subject of linguistics. Cultural studies commonly explores culture as a grammar of signs.

Reading: Saussure, F. de (1960) *Course in General Linguistics*. London: Peter Owen.

### Culture as 'like a language'

Structuralism extends its reach from 'words' to the language of cultural signs in general. Thus human relations, material objects and images are all analyzed through the structures of signs. In Claude Lévi-Strauss (see Leach, 1974), we find structuralist principles at work when he describes kinship systems as 'like a language' – that is, family relations are held to be structured by the internal organization of binaries. For example, kinship patterns are structured around the incest taboo that divides people into the marriageable and the prohibited.

Typical of Lévi-Strauss's structuralism is his approach to food, which, he declares, is not so much good to eat, as good to think with. That is, food is a signifier of symbolic meanings. Cultural conventions tell us what constitutes food and what does not, the circumstances of their eating and the meanings attached to them. Lévi-Strauss tends towards the structuralist trope of binaries: the raw and the cooked, the edible and the inedible, nature and culture, each of which has meaning only in relation to its opposite. Cooking transforms nature into culture and the raw into the cooked.

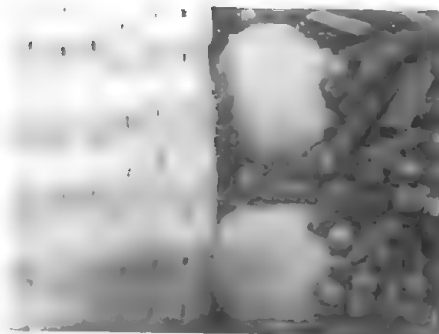
~The edible and the inedible are marked not by questions of nutrition but by cultural meanings. An example of this would be the Jewish prohibition against pork and the necessity to prepare food in culturally specific ways (kosher food). Here, binary oppositions of the edible–inedible mark another binary, insiders and outsiders, and hence the boundaries of the culture or social order. Later, Barthes (see Chapter 3) was to extend the structuralist account of culture to the practices of popular culture and their naturalized meanings or myths. He was to argue that the meanings of texts are to be grasped not in terms of the intentions of specific human beings but as a set of signifying practices.

## In sum:

- Culturalism focuses on meaning production by human actors in a historical context.
- Culturalism stresses history.
- Culturalism focuses on interpretation as a way of understanding meaning.
- Structuralism points to culture as an expression of deep structures of language that lie outside of the intentions of actors and constrain them.
- Structuralism is synchronic in approach, analysing the structures of relations in a snapshot of a particular moment. As such, it asserts the specificity of culture and its irreducibility to any other phenomena.
- Structuralism has asserted the possibility of a science of signs and thus of objective knowledge.

Structuralism is best approached as a method of analysis rather than an all-embracing philosophy. However, the notion of stability of meaning, upon which the binaries of structuralism and its pretensions to surety of knowledge are based, is the subject of attack by poststructuralism. That is, poststructuralism deconstructs the very notion of the stable structures of language.

## THOUGHTFUL FOOD



© Photographer: Emma A. Jane

- Following Lévi-Strauss, how might this meal – a pre-prepared frozen dinner – be good to think with?
- What are some of the visual aspects of this dish that signify that it might be: a) food; and b) not-food?

## Poststructuralism (and postmodernism)

The term poststructuralism implies 'after structuralism', embodying notions of both critique and absorption. That is, poststructuralism absorbs aspects of structural linguistics while subjecting it to a critique that, it is claimed, surpasses structuralism. In short, poststructuralism rejects the idea of an underlying stable structure that founds meaning through fixed binary pairs (black-white; good-bad). Rather, meaning is unstable, being always deferred and in process. Meaning cannot be confined to single words, sentences or particular texts but is the outcome of relationships between texts, that is, intertextuality. Like its predecessor, poststructuralism is anti-humanist in its decentring of the unified, coherent human subject as the origin of stable meanings.

## Derrida: the instability of language

The primary philosophical sources of poststructuralism are Derrida (1976) and Foucault (1984d) (see Chapter 3). Since they give rise to different emphases, poststructuralism cannot be regarded as a unified body of work. Derrida's focus is on language and the deconstruction of an immediacy, or identity, between words and meanings.

Derrida accepts Saussure's argument that meaning is generated by relations of difference between signifiers rather than by reference to an independent object world. However, for Derrida, the consequence of this play of signifiers is that meaning can never be fixed. Words carry many meanings, including the echoes or traces of other meanings from other related words in other contexts. For example, if we look up the meaning of a word in a dictionary, we are referred to other words in an infinite process of deferral. Meaning slides down a chain of signifiers abolishing a stable signified. Thus, Derrida introduces the notion of *différance*, 'difference and deferral'. Here the production of meaning in the process of signification is continually deferred and supplemented.

Derrida proceeds to deconstruct the 'stable' binaries upon which structuralism, and indeed western philosophy in general, rely. He argues for the 'undecidability' of binary oppositions. In particular, deconstruction involves the dismantling of hierarchical conceptual oppositions such as speech/writing, reality/appearance, nature/culture, reason/madness, etc., which exclude and devalue the 'inferior' part of the binary.

For Derrida, 'we think only in signs' and there is no original meaning circulating outside of 'representation'. It is in this sense that there is nothing outside of texts or nothing but texts (by which it is *not* meant that there is no independent material world). That is, the meanings of texts are constitutive of practices.

## BUDDHIST SHRINE



© Photographer: Freya Hadley

- What cultural practices take place around this Japanese Buddhist shrine?
- What is the meaning of the sign on the 'flags'? This sign was rotated and used in a different context. What meaning did it have in that context?
- What conclusion can you draw from this about the meanings of signs?

## *Foucault and discursive practices*

Like Derrida, Foucault (1972) argues against structuralist theories of language which conceive of it as an autonomous, rule-governed system. He also opposes interpretative or

hermeneutic methods that seek to disclose the hidden meanings of language. Foucault is concerned with the description and analysis of the surfaces of discourse and their effects under determinate material and historical conditions. For Foucault, discourse concerns both language and practice. The concept refers to the regulated production of knowledge through language which gives meaning to both material objects and social practices.

Discourse constructs, defines and produces the objects of knowledge in an intelligible way while at the same time excluding other ways of reasoning as unintelligible. Foucault attempts to identify the historical conditions and determining rules of the formation of regulated ways of speaking about objects, that is, discursive practices and discursive formations. He explores the circumstances under which statements are combined and regulated to form and define a distinct field of knowledge/objects requiring a particular set of concepts and delimiting a specific 'regime of truth' (i.e. what counts as truth).

For Foucault, discourse regulates not only what can be said under determinate social and cultural conditions but also who can speak, when and where. Consequently, much of his work is concerned with the historical investigation of power and the production of subjects through that power. Foucault does not formulate power as a centralized constraining force; rather, power is dispersed through all levels of a social formation and is productive of social relations and identities (i.e. generative).

Foucault conceives of the subject as radically historized, that is, persons are wholly and only the product of history. In other words, subjects – as opposed to biological bodies – are entirely socially constructed: generated over time and studied by genealogy. Foucault explores the genealogy of the body as a site of disciplinary practices that bring subjects into being. Such practices are the consequences of specific historical discourses of crime, punishment, medicine, science and sexuality. Thus, Foucault (1973) analyses statements about madness which give us knowledge about it; the rules that prescribe what is 'sayable' or 'thinkable' about madness; subjects who personify madness; and the practices within institutions that deal with madness (see Chapter 3).

## *Anti-essentialism*

Perhaps the most significant influence of poststructuralism within cultural studies is its anti-essentialism. Essentialism assumes that words have stable referents and that social categories reflect an essential underlying identity. By this token there would be stable truths to be found and an essence of, for example, femininity or black identity. However, for post-structuralism there can be no truths, subjects or identities outside of language. Further, this is a language that does not have stable referents and is therefore unable to represent fixed truths or identities. In this sense, femininity or black identity are not fixed universal things but descriptions in language which through social convention come to be 'what counts as truth' (i.e. the temporary stabilization of meaning).

Anti-essentialism does not mean that we cannot speak of truth or identity. Rather, it points to them as being not universals of nature but productions of culture in specific times and places. The speaking subject is dependent on the prior existence of discursive positions. Truth is not so much found as made and identities are discursive constructions.

That is, truth and identity are not fixed objects but are regulated ways that we speak about the world or ourselves. Instead of the scientific certainty of structuralism, poststructuralism offers us Richard Rorty's take on irony – that is, an awareness of the contingent, constructed character of our beliefs and understandings that lack firm universal foundations.

### *Postmodernism*

There is no straightforward equation of poststructuralism with postmodernism, and the sharing of the prefix 'post' can lead to an unwarranted conflation of the two. However, they do share a common approach to epistemology; namely the rejection of truth as a fixed eternal object. Derrida's assertion of the instability of meaning and Foucault's awareness of the historically contingent character of truth are echoed in Jean-François Lyotard's postmodern 'incredulity towards metanarratives'. Lyotard (1984) rejects the idea of grand narratives or stories that can give us certain knowledge of the direction, meaning and moral path of human 'development'. Lyotard has in mind the teleology of Marxism, the certainty of science and the morality of Christianity.

Postmodern writers like Lyotard (1984) or Rorty (1989) share with Foucault the idea that knowledge is not metaphysical, transcendental or universal but specific to particular times and spaces. For postmodernism, knowledge is perspectival in character – that is, there can be no one totalizing knowledge that is able to grasp the 'objective' character of the world. Rather, we have and require multiple viewpoints or truths by which to interpret a complex, heterogeneous human existence. Thus, postmodernism argues that knowledge is:

- specific to language-games;
- local, plural and diverse.

One strand of postmodernism is concerned with these questions of epistemology, that is, questions of truth and knowledge. However, an equally significant body of work is centred on important cultural changes in contemporary life. Postmodern culture is said to be marked by a sense of the fragmentary, ambiguous and uncertain quality of the world, along with high levels of personal and social reflexivity. This goes hand in hand with a stress on contingency, irony and the blurring of cultural boundaries. Cultural texts are said to be typified by self-consciousness, bricolage and intertextuality. For some thinkers, postmodern culture heralds the collapse of the modern distinction between the real and simulations (see Chapter 6).

**#** Poststructuralism and postmodernism are anti-essentialist approaches that stress the constitutive role of an unstable language in the formation of cultural meaning.

Poststructuralism and postmodernism argue that subjectivity is an effect of language or discourse and also that subjects are fractured – that is, we can take up multiple subject

positions offered to us in discourse. However, rather than rely on an account that stresses 'subjection' by external discourses, some writers have looked to psychoanalysis, and particularly Jacques Lacan's poststructuralist reading of Freud, for ways to think about the 'internal' constitution of subjects.

### *Psychoanalysis and subjectivity*

Psychoanalysis is a controversial body of thought. For its supporters (Chodorow, 1978, 1989; Mitchell, 1974), its great strength lies in its rejection of the fixed nature of subjects and sexuality. That is, psychoanalysis concentrates on the construction and formation of subjectivity.

### *The Freudian self*

According to the Austrian doctor and so-called 'father' of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1977), the self is constituted in terms of:

- an ego, or conscious rational mind;
- a superego, or social conscience;
- the unconscious (also known as the id) – the source and repository of the symbolic workings of the mind which functions with a different logic from reason.

This structuring of the human subject is not something we are born with; rather, it is something we acquire through our relationships with our immediate 'carers'. Here the self is by definition fractured; consequently we must understand the unified narrative of the self as something we attain over time. This is said to be achieved through entry into the symbolic order of language and culture. Through processes of identification with others and with social discourses, we create an identity that embodies an illusion of wholeness.

Within Freudian theory, the libido or sexual drive does not have any pre-given fixed aim or object. Rather, through fantasy, any object, which includes persons or parts of bodies, can be the target of desire. Consequently, an almost infinite number of sexual objects and practices are within the domain of human sexuality. However, Freud's work is concerned with documenting and explaining the regulation and repression of this 'polymorphous perversity' through the resolution (or not) of the Oedipus complex into 'normal' heterosexual gendered relationships.

### *The Oedipus complex*

In classical Freudian thought, the Oedipus complex marks the formation of the ego and of gendered subjectivity. Prior to the Oedipal moment, we are unable to distinguish clearly between ourselves and other objects; nor do we have a sense of ourselves as female or male. An infant's first love-object is its mother, whom it both identifies with and desires. That is, the child wants both to 'be' the mother and to 'possess' the mother. The resolution of the

Oedipus complex involves the repudiation of the mother as a love-object and the separation of the subject from the mother.

For boys, the incest taboo, symbolized by the power of the father as phallus, means that desire for the mother is untenable and threatened by punishment in the form of castration. As a consequence, boys shift their identification from the mother to the father and take on masculinity and heterosexuality as the desirable subject form. For girls, the separation from the mother is more complex and arguably never completed. Girls do not entirely repudiate mother identification nor do they take on father identification. However, they do recognize the power of the phallus as something which they do not have ('penis envy') but which the father does. Since they do not have a penis (or symbolic phallus), and thus cannot ever 'be' it, they cannot identify with it. However, they can set out to possess it. This they do by seeking to have a child by the father or, more accurately, other men who stand in for the father as phallus.

Psychoanalysis can be understood to be an ahistorical universal account of subjectivity marking the psychic processes of humankind across history. Furthermore, for many critics it is outlandishly patriarchal and phallogocentric (not to mention just plain bizarre). As such it has proved to be unacceptable within cultural studies. However, sympathetic critics have suggested that psychoanalysis can be reworked as a historically contingent account of subject formation - that is, one that describes it only under specific historical circumstances. Changes in the cultural and symbolic order are said to lead to changes in subject formation, and vice versa. The subversiveness of psychoanalysis would then lie in its disruption of the social order, including gendered relations, by trying to bring new kinds of thinking and subjectivities into being. Thus, psychoanalysis could, it is argued, be stripped of its phallogocentrism and be made appropriate to the political project of feminism (Chapter 9).

Oedipus was a king from Greek mythology who inadvertently fulfils a prophecy by killing his father, Laius, and marrying his mother, Jocasta. After discovering what has happened, Jocasta hangs herself, while Oedipus gouges out his eyes with her brooch pin. The Oedipus myth forms the basis of the play *Oedipus the King* which was written by the Greek tragic dramatist Sophocles and first performed around 429BC. Freud went on to use the term 'Oedipus complex' to refer to his idea that children are subconsciously sexually attracted to the parent of the opposite sex. Freud claims this manifests in castration anxiety in boys and penis envy in girls. This is one of many Freudian theories now considered highly dubious. Steven Pinker, for instance, observes that, 'The idea that boys want to sleep with their mother strikes most men as the silliest thing they have every heard' (1997: 460). Nevertheless, theories about the role and importance of the subconscious are being rehabilitated with the help of brain-scanning technology which shows that conscious reasoning is only a small part of the brain's work (Chapter 4). Most of this subconscious activity, however, seems to involve survival-related data processing rather than repressed incest fantasies.

## The politics of difference: feminism, race and postcolonial theory

A theme of structuralism and poststructuralism is the idea that meaning is generated through the play of difference down a chain of signifiers. Subjects are formed through difference, so that what we are is constituted in part by what we are not.

**#** There has been a growing emphasis on difference in the cultural field, and in particular on questions of gender, race and nationality.

### Feminism

Feminism (Chapter 9) is a field of theory and politics that contains competing perspectives and prescriptions for action. However, in general terms, we may locate feminism as asserting that sex is a fundamental and irreducible axis of social organization which, to date, has subordinated women to men. Thus, feminism is centrally concerned with sex as an organizing principle of social life where gender relations are thoroughly saturated with power. The subordination of women is argued to be evident across a range of social institutions and practices; that is, male power and female subordination are structural. This has led some feminists to adopt the concept of patriarchy, with its derivative meanings of the male-headed family, 'mastery' and superiority.

Liberal feminism stresses equality of opportunity for women. This is held to be achievable within the broad structures of the existing legal and economic frameworks. In contrast, socialist feminists point to the interconnections between class and gender, including the fundamental place of gender inequalities in the reproduction of capitalism. Instead of liberal and socialist feminism's stress on equality and sameness, difference or radical feminism asserts essential differences between men and women. These are celebrated as representing the creative difference of women and the superiority of 'feminine' values.

**Problems with patriarchy** A criticism of the concept of patriarchy is its treatment of the category of 'woman' as undifferentiated. That is, all women are taken to share something fundamental in common, in contrast to all men. This is an assumption continually challenged by black feminists, amongst others, who have argued that the movement has defined women as white and overlooked the differences between black and white women's experiences. This stress on difference is shared by poststructuralist and postmodern feminists who argue that sex and gender are social and cultural constructions, which cannot be adequately explained in terms of biology or reduced to functions of capitalism. This is an anti-essentialist stance which argues that femininity and masculinity are not essential universal categories but discursive constructions. That is, gender is constituted by the way we talk about and perform it. As such, poststructuralist feminism is concerned with the cultural construction of subjectivity *per se* and with a range of possible masculinities and femininities.



### *Race, ethnicity and hybridity*

Another 'politics of difference' which has received increasing attention within cultural studies is that of race and ethnicity in postcolonial times (see Chapters 8 and 14). Ethnicity is a cultural concept centred on norms, values, beliefs, cultural symbols and practices that mark a process of cultural boundary formation. The idea of 'racialization' has been deployed to illustrate the argument that race is a social construction and not a universal or essential category of either biology or culture. Races do not exist outside of representation but are formed in and by it in a process of social and political power struggle.

There are two central concerns that have emerged in and through postcolonial theory (Williams and Chrisman, 1993), namely those of domination-subordination and hybridity-creolization. Questions of domination and subordination surface most directly through colonial military control and the structured subordination of racialized groups. In more cultural terms, questions arise about the denigration and subordination of 'native' culture by colonial and imperial powers along with the relationship between place and diaspora identities.

The question of hybridity or creolization points to the fact that neither the colonial nor colonized cultures and languages can be presented in a 'pure' form. Inseparable from each other, they give rise to forms of hybridity. In metropolitan cultures like America and Britain, this concept is reworked to include the hybrid cultures produced by, for example, Latino-Americans and British Asians.

### THE NEW CULTURAL STUDIES PROJECT

Gary Hall and Clare Birchall's edited book *New Cultural Studies: Adventures in Theory* (2006) makes the claim that there is a 'new' wave of cultural studies. In particular they are interested in the place of theory in cultural studies. They do this by presenting the work of what they argue is a 'post-Birmingham-School' generation of cultural studies writers such as Neil Badmington (writing about posthumanism); Caroline Bassett (writing about digital cultures); Dave Boothroyd (writing on drugs); Jeremy Gilbert (writing about anti-capitalist politics); and Joanna Zylińska (writing about bioethics in the age of new media), amongst a number of other writers.

They also explore the work of thinkers who influenced and informed the 'new' cultural studies. Here a decidedly 'old' list of philosophers appears including Gilles Deleuze, Ernesto Laclau, Giorgio Agamben, Georges Bataille, Slavoj Žižek and others. So what is 'new' here is the use to which these philosophers are put by the latest wave of cultural studies writers, as Hall and Birchall see it.

The writing of the new cultural studies as presented in the volume is disparate and not easily lumped together. It is hard to see, in many ways, how this adds up to something that could be seen as a coherent new project. There does seem to be a touch of hype about the book's title. That said, some thematic strands do emerge:

- Theorists trying to conceive of democracy and politics in new ways using the work of Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Deleuze, Agamben and Niklas Luhmann, in which ideas drawn from Marxism and materialism are prominent (see Chapter 14).

- Theorists that challenge the intersection between human and non-human or not-human; between nature (biology) and culture (technology/science) and between human/animal. Key theorists here include Donna Haraway, Don Ihde and Bruno Latour. A central theme is the convergence of culture and science in which science is understood in the context of questions about representation and the political role of scientific discourse in generating ideas about hope and utopia (see Chapter 5).
- Theorists that are trying to conceive notions of subjectivity and identity in new ways, drawing upon philosophers like Deleuze, Ihde and Žižek. In particular, questions are raised about what is human and whether, for example, a genetic code can be held to be intellectual property or whether non-human animals should be granted 'human rights' (as in Spain where apes have been given such rights) (see Chapter 7).
- Theorists who are interested in the role of bodies and affect in politics and identity. In particular the place of fear and hope is given prominence (see Chapter 4).
- Theorists trying to find a road between science, ontology and social construction. The core theme seems to be to avoiding the essentialist humanist subject while trying to preserve notions of truth, evolution and biology (see Chapter 3).

The website that accompanies the book, *New Cultural Studies: The Liquid Theory Reader*, does try to add a new dimension to theory building by publishing as a wiki. This means that readers can add to and amend the published content. Theory or 'the theorist' is then a collective thread rather than a set entity. Book chapters are then transposed into hard copies at intervals. That said, there had not been much new activity when the site was visited in 2014 when researching for *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice* so it is not clear (to us) how successful this idea has been.

### CENTRAL PROBLEMS IN CULTURAL STUDIES

Over the past 30 years or so, cultural studies has developed to a stage where similar problems, issues and debates have emerged from within the literature. A 'problem' in cultural studies is constituted by a field of recurrent doubts and puzzles in the literature. Although such problems are discussed throughout this book it is worth crystallizing some of the key points at this stage.

### *language and the material*

A long-running debate within cultural studies concerns the relationship between culture as signification and culture as material. This debate is located in the triangular confrontation between:

1. the legacy of Marxism within cultural studies;
2. the development of an anti-reductionist strain within cultural studies;
3. the recent ascendancy of poststructuralism.

For Marxism, culture is a corporeal force locked into the socially organized production of the material conditions of existence. Marxism has argued that the material mode of production is 'the real foundation' of cultural superstructures. That is, the material – understood here as the economic – determines the cultural. However, this orthodox reading of Marx proved to be too mechanical and deterministic in exploring the *specific* features of culture. Consequently, the narrative of cultural studies involves a distancing of itself from Marxist reductionism. Instead, the analysis of the autonomous logic of language, culture, representation and consumption was placed in the foreground. Structuralism provided the means by which to explore language and popular culture as autonomous practices by emphasizing the irreducible character of the cultural (as a set of distinct practices with their own internal organization).

Some critics have felt that cultural studies has gone too far in its assertion of the autonomy of culture and has abandoned political economy. Although this argument has some merit, it is not the case in the multiperspectival approach offered by Hall et al's 'circuit of culture' (see Figure 2.2 on page 69). Here a full analysis of any cultural practice requires a discussion of both 'economy' and 'culture' and an articulation of the relations between them.

### The textual character of culture

The machinery and operations of language are central concerns for cultural studies. Indeed, the investigation of culture has often been regarded as virtually interchangeable with the exploration of meaning produced symbolically through signifying systems that work 'like a language'. This turn to studying language within cultural studies represents a major intellectual gain and research achievement. It has also involved some short-sightedness in that the focus on language has led cultural studies to focus on language arguably at the expense of other issues such as lived experience, cultural policy, and so on.

Most students of cultural studies are aware that culture can be read as a text, using concepts like signification, code or discourse. However, an emphasis on structuralist and poststructuralist accounts of signification has sometimes led cultural studies to reify language as a 'thing' or 'system' rather than grasp it as a social practice. The danger here is a kind of textual determinism. That is, textual subject positions are held to be indistinguishable from, and constitutive of, speaking subjects. The living, embodied speaking and acting subject may be lost from view.

The metaphor of culture as 'like a language' has a great deal to recommend it. However, there is also much to be gained by describing culture in terms of practices, routines and spatial arrangements. Not only is language always embedded in practice, but also all practices signify. Further, the identification of textual codes and subject positions does not guarantee that the proscribed meanings are 'taken up' by concrete persons in daily life (see Ang, 1985; Morley, 1992). In sum, the study of language is absolutely critical to cultural studies as an ongoing project while possessing limitations.

## EXERCISE

Write down three different types of cultural text, then comment on the following

- What are the common elements that make up a cultural text?
- What different features of each of the three texts can you identify?
- Can you distinguish any differences between a text and a practice?

### The location of culture

For Williams (1981, 1983) culture is located, to all intents and purposes, within flexible but identifiable boundaries. That is, culture is understood to be a facet of place. Indeed it is constitutive of place. Insofar as culture is a common whole way of life, its boundaries are largely locked into those of nationality and ethnicity, that is, the culture of, for example, the English or perhaps the British. However, globalization has made the idea of culture as a whole way of life located within definite boundaries increasingly problematic.

In particular, that which is considered to be local is produced within and by globalizing discourses. These include global corporate marketing strategies that orient themselves to differentiated 'local' markets. Much that is considered to be local, and counterpoised to the global, is the outcome of translocal processes (Robertson, 1992). Place is now forged globally by virtue of the movement of cultural elements from one location to another. For example, population movement and electronic communications have enabled increased cultural juxtapositioning, meeting and mixing. These developments suggest the need to escape from a model of culture as a locally bounded 'whole way of life'.

The processes of globalization suggest that we need to rethink our conception of culture. Culture is not best understood in terms of locations and roots but more as hybrid and creolized cultural routes in global space.

## KEY THINKERS

### Homi K. Bhabha (1949–)

Homi Bhabha was born in India and educated at Bombay University and Christ Church College, Oxford. He is currently Professor in the Humanities at the University of Chicago, where he teaches in the departments of English and Art. Strongly influenced by poststructuralism, Bhabha argues against the tendency to

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essentialize 'Third World' countries into a homogeneous identity, claiming instead that all sense of nationhood is narrativized. For Bhabha, the instability of meaning in language leads us to think of culture, identities and identifications as always a place of borders and hybridity rather than of fixed stable entities, a view encapsulated in his use of concepts such as mimicry, interstice, hybridity and liminality.

Reading: Bhabha, H. (1994) *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.

Yet there remains a value in locating culture in-place in order to be able to say things like 'this is a valued and meaningful practice in Australian culture' or that the cultural flows of the 'Black Atlantic' involve musical forms of 'West African origin'. The *duality of culture* lies in its being both 'in-place' and of 'no-place'.

## EXERCISE

Consider what kind of a place you call 'home'.

- What feelings do you associate with 'home'?
- What symbols, practices and emotions give 'home' meaning and significance for you?

Consider the phrase 'homeland'.

- What are the elements that give this term meaning for you?
- How many of the symbols and practices associated with your homeland originated from outside of its borders?

## How is cultural change possible?

Cultural studies writers have consistently identified the examination of culture, power and politics as central to the domain. Indeed, cultural studies can be understood as a body of theory generated by thinkers who regard the production of theoretical knowledge as a political practice. Many cultural studies writers have wanted to link their work with political movements. This followed the model of the 'organic' intellectuals (Gramsci, 1968), who were said to be the thinking and organizing elements of the counter-hegemonic class and its allies.

However, there is little evidence to suggest that cultural studies writers have ever been 'organically' connected with political movements in any significant way. Rather, as Hall (1992a)

has commented, cultural studies intellectuals acted 'as if' they were organic intellectuals, or in the hope that one day they could be. Originally cultural studies writers imagined themselves organically linked to revolutionary class factions. Later, as class declined as a political vehicle and socialism receded as an immediate goal, New Social Movements (NSMs) took on the mantle of political agents. However, cultural studies has not been especially successful in forging links with such movements either.

Indeed, there is little evidence of popular support for radical political change in the West at all, let alone 'cultural revolution'. Reform seems to be the only possible way to move forward within western liberal democracies. This does not mean that we have to accept liberal democracy as it stands. On the contrary, a useful aim might be to push for the extension of democratic practices within the liberal democratic framework. This has led some in the field to argue for cultural policy that is specifically and carefully targeted with a clear sense of the intended outcomes and mechanisms of transformation.

## Rationality and its limits

Western cultures mostly assume that human life is explicable in terms of the rational choices of individual actors. Rational action is that which can be justified within a specific cultural context. Cultural studies would not want to adopt the notion of the rational actor who calculates the means to maximize her or his interests. Nevertheless, there has been an implicit assumption that rationality could provide logical explanations for cultural phenomena. For example, a common assumption has been that racism and sexism would dwindle in the face of rational argument.

Often absent from cultural studies are the non-linear, non-rational and emotionally driven aspects of human behaviour. The exception to this observation is the import of psychoanalysis into the field. For example, Hall (1990, 1992b, 1996a) and Butler (1993) have profitably explored Lacanian psychoanalysis and the processes by which our psychic identifications, or emotional investments, are attached to disciplinary discourses. Yet psychoanalysis has its own problems, not least its phallocentrism and spurious claims to being an objective science (see Chapters 2 and 9). But still, there are very good reasons why cultural studies as a discipline needs to further develop issues of affect and emotion. Many of the horrors of our world – for example, violence in forms such as sexual assault, road rage and war – involve emotional responses and addressing these is highly unlikely to be a simple matter of argument and analysis.

A range of postmodern thinkers has criticized the impulses of modern rationality. They argue that it brings us not so much progress as domination and oppression. The very impulse to control nature through science and rationality is, it is argued, an impulse to control and dominate human beings. This is an instrumental rationality whose logic leads not only to industrialization but also to concentration camps.

Foucault, for example, argues that:

- knowledge is not metaphysical, transcendental or universal;
- knowledge is a matter of perspective;

- knowledge is not pure or neutral but is always from a point of view;
- knowledge is itself implicated in regimes of power.

However, Foucault also questions the idea of a clear and final break between enlightenment and post-enlightenment thought, or between the modern and postmodern (Foucault, 1984c: 249).

### The character of truth

How can we ground or justify cultural theory and cultural politics? This is one of the central problems of cultural studies. For modernists, the adoption of a realist epistemology has allowed writers and researchers to make universal truth claims. It follows that once we know the truth about the workings of the social world, then we can intervene strategically in human affairs with confidence. All the social sciences, from sociology to economics and psychology, were founded on the premise that conceptual and empirical truth can be discovered.

However, realist epistemologies have largely been displaced within cultural studies. This is a consequence of the influence of poststructuralism, postmodernism and other anti-representationalist paradigms. These widely accepted (within cultural studies) strands of thinking have undermined the notion of objective and universal truth.

For the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1968) truth is expressed in language so that sentences are the only things that can be true or false. Truth is nothing other than a mobile army of metaphors and metonymy (Nietzsche, cited in Jusseling, 1976: 106). An acculturated authority arbitrates between these sentences. Thus 'truth' is a question of whose interpretations count as truth. Truth is embroiled in power. Foucault (1972, 1973), whose work was greatly informed by Nietzsche, argues that different epistemes, or configurations of knowledge, shape the practices and social order of specific historical periods. In place of truth, Foucault speaks instead about particular 'regimes of truth'. Similarly, Rorty (1980, 1989) argues that all truth is culture-bound and specific to times and places. Knowledge and values are located in time, space and social power. To argue that all knowledge is positional or culture-bound is not to embrace relativism. Relativism would imply the ability to see across different forms of knowledge and to conclude that they are of equal value. Instead, as Rorty argues, we are always positioned within acculturated knowledge. There is no final vocabulary of language that is 'true' in the sense of accurately picturing an independent object world called reality. Our vocabularies are only final in the sense of currently being without a tenable challenge. Thus, our best bet is to go on telling stories about ourselves that aim to achieve the most valued description and arrangement of human actions and institutions.

It is telling that, even in the so-called 'hard' sciences, some researchers are retreating from the idea that this knowledge sector can establish irrefutable proofs. The astrophysicist Geraint F. Lewis, for example, goes so far as to argue that – unlike the statements of 'absolute truth' that can be proved in, for example, geometry – science has proved nothing (2014). Lewis figures science as being like a long-running courtroom drama which does

not enable a verdict of absolute guilt or innocence, but only educated guesses based on the ongoing accumulation of evidence:

Every theoretical model is a good description of the universe around us ... But exploring into new territories reveals deficiencies that lower our belief in whether a particular description continues to accurately represent our experiments, while our belief in alternatives can grow *[sic]*. Will we ultimately know the truth and hold the laws that truly govern the workings of the cosmos within our hands? While our degree of belief in some mathematical models may get stronger and stronger, without an infinite amount of testing, how can we ever be sure they are reality? (Lewis, 2014)

Similarly, the Nobel Prize-winning theoretical physicist Richard Feynman admits he has 'approximate answers and possible beliefs in different degrees of certainty about different things' but was not absolutely sure of anything (Feynman, 2011). Such views complicate the common stereotype that the critical, speculative and historically-situated theorizing found in humanities-based disciplines such as cultural studies has little or nothing in common with those methods used in the empirical sciences.

### QUESTIONS OF METHODOLOGY

Cultural studies has not paid much attention to the classical questions of research methods and methodology. Thus, methodological texts by Pertti Alasuutari (1995), Jim McGuigan (1997b) and Ann Gray (2003) – and, in media studies, Alan McKee (2003), and Bonnie S. Brennan (2013) – are exceptions to the rule. Further, most of the debates in cultural studies have not been concerned with the technicalities of method but with the philosophical approaches that underpin them; that is, methodology. The most significant methodological debates within cultural studies have centred on the status of knowledge and truth, as discussed above. These are issues of epistemology, or the philosophy of knowledge. As we have seen, the realist argument is that a degree of certain knowledge about an independent object world (a real world) is possible even though methodological vigilance and reflexivity need to be maintained. Within cultural studies this point of view has more often than not appeared in a quasi-Marxist guise. In contrast, for poststructuralists knowledge is not a question of discovering objective and accurate truth but of constructing interpretations about the world which are 'taken to be true'.

### Key methodologies in cultural studies

Despite disputes about the status of knowledge, it is reasonably clear which methods are most widely deployed within cultural studies, though researchers disagree about their relative merits. We may start with the standard methodological distinction between quantitative and qualitative research methods. That is, between, respectively, methods that centre on numbers and the counting of things (e.g. statistics and surveys) and those that concentrate